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# THE MASS MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIA

By

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## Abstract

*Lack of accountability among political officials has, for ages and in many societies, posed a problem to the attainment of true democracy. The failure of political office holders to exhibit transparency in governance leads to dearth of information, a vital resource necessary for the governed to take decisions critical to the survival of democracy. This article posits that while political leaders would not willingly be transparent, the mass media should constantly push for transparency in the system. To this end, the paper makes a strong case for the passage of the Freedom of Information Bill by the National Assembly, reduction of self-censorship by the media and further deregulation of media ownership to increase the diversity of voices in the media and the level of demand for political transparency.*

## Introduction

Accountability is a highly cherished value in any society. Hence, all political systems, whether democratic, liberal or authoritarian, lay claim to accountability, which, it appears, has moved from being an ordinary concept to a value to be attained. To allege that a political system is not accountable may imply that such a system is irresponsible, undemocratic, disrespectful to, or disinterested in, the wishes of its citizens. Democratic accountability is essential to the smooth functioning of the political system.

McQuail (2005:208-209) defines accountability as the "answering to *someone* for something according to some *criterion* and with varying degrees of obligation on the part of the media". Implicit in this definition is that in a modern system, democratic accountability involves the mass media and their institutional activities.

Democratic accountability relates to the political values of openness or transparency. In this paper, the three concepts - political transparency, democratic accountability and political accountability - are used interchangeably, except when it is otherwise openly expressed. Transparency denotes openness, communication and accountability. It has gained currency of recent as a means of holding political leaders accountable for their actions.

Balkin (1998) stresses that democratic accountability encompasses three political virtues which, though distinct, usually work together. These are: *information transparency* - knowledge about government actors, decisions and access to government information; *participatory transparency* - ability to participate in political decisions either through fair representation or direct participation; *accountability transparency* -

ability to hold government officials accountable.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is anchored on the Media Dependency Theory propounded by DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach in 1975. According to the theory, the media system being an important part of the social fabric of the society has relationships with individuals, groups, organizations and other social systems. These relationships cause individuals and groups to depend on the media because the media control some 'dependency-engendering' resources. These resources, according to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989:303), are:

Information *gathering or creating* - reporters gather information about people and events that we need to know or are simply interested in knowing...information *processing* - the transformation of raw information that has been gathered or created...information *dissemination* or the capacity to get information out to a mass audience.

These resources are somewhat scarce, and here lies the power of the media their control over scarce information resources that individuals, groups, organizations and societies depend upon to attain their goals. According to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989:303):

Media dependency relationships rest on *goals*, on the one hand, and *resources*, on the other. Part of what it means to live in a society is that in order for individuals, groups, and large organizations to attain their personal and collective goals, they have to rely upon resources that other people, groups, or systems control, and vice versa.

According to Baran (2007:429), citizens increasingly depend on the media to (a) "understand the social world; (b) to act meaningfully and effectively in the society; and (c) to find fantasy and escape or diversion".

Thus, individuals develop dependency relationships with the media, because they want to achieve the goal of being in a position to critically assess their leaders based on the information at their disposal (given by the mass media), without which it is difficult for them to hold political leaders accountable.

In the current globalized world, the mass media have grown in importance and relevance, to the extent that they form the thread that links all parts of the world, and become the life-blood of globalization. Institutionally, the media have the resources (that are not available to the individual or other institutions) to gather, process and disseminate information to the audience members who, in turn, put this information into various uses, that is, utilize the information to achieve their individual or corporate goals. It would be impossible, by today's complexity, for the individual or organization to be everywhere to witness, first hand, what goes on there. The media bridge this gap. Their intrinsic, mediational functions place them in a position that individuals, groups and large organizations rely on the media's discharge of such functions to fulfill their information need for their daily living.



### **Need for Accountability**

Public trust is an important organizational goal, and can be achieved in different ways depending on the type of organisation. For a government, public trust is more a function of transparency than any other factor. Public trust means public acceptance. Political parties ride to power on the crest of public trust. Public trust is earned, not bought; it is a culmination of the public's judgment on the party, without which an organisation's viability will be in jeopardy. Although factors such as ethnicity, religion, gender, race and threat of force may come in as variables in public trust, transparency level is, in the long run, the currency that will guarantee the survival of such an organization as long as it relates with the public.

The need to earn public trust in Nigeria has led to the establishment of institutions to promote public accountability in governance. The establishment of the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), etc are meant to fight corruption, open up governance and engender accountability. Although these institutional frameworks appear to emphasize on financial accountability, they, nevertheless, provide the foundation upon which other aspects of transparency in governance can be built and sustained.

### **Democratic Transparency and the Media**

Government cannot achieve political transparency without the involvement of the mass media. This is so because the government, oftentimes, reaches the public through the mass media. Therefore, the involvement of the mass media in democratic accountability is somewhat indispensable. The mass media, by their functions, promote accountability and transparency in the society. By exposing corrupt or inept officials, malfunctioning public utilities, badly run public organizations, the processes in decision-making in government, activities of government, etc, the mass media unveil government before the public for scrutiny. To achieve the three political virtues of informational transparency, participatory transparency and accountability transparency earlier mentioned, the mass media must be actively involved. Balkin (1998) notes that: The mass media can make the political system more 'transparent' in all three respects: media can help people understand the operations of government, participate in political decisions, and hold government officials accountable. For this to be possible in practice, the mass media must themselves be accountable. According to McQuail (2005:207), "media accountability is all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication". McQuail (2005:207) further outlines three general criteria for media accountability: they should respect rights to free publication; they should prevent or limit harm arising from publication to individuals as well as to society; and they should promote positive aspects of publication rather than merely being restrictive. Media accountability involves some measure of responsibility which has to do with the obligations of the media to the society and the expectations of the society from the media.

Political accountability demands that public officials and political office holders come under close scrutiny. Since the citizens' ability to monitor the politicians is severely limited, they depend on the mass media to monitor the actions or inactions of office holders. Media reports on the activities of office holders then become central in helping to determine whether they deserve to be voted for another term of office.

During crisis such as national disasters, politicians are compelled to act to demonstrate their competence in handling the situation, so as to bring succour to the affected and also reduce their future vulnerability. Media scrutiny therefore "raises the politician's incentives to respond, because citizens may use the information in their voting decision" (Besley, Burgess and Prat, 2002:45). As Besley et al (2002:46) further put it, "in a democracy citizens require information that they can use to select politicians who serve their needs and to punish those who do not, otherwise formal democracy has no bite."

### **Government Treatment of Mass Media**

The mere existence of the media does not guarantee the media as a ready and effective vehicle for scrutiny of the process of governance. Of necessity, the media should have timely access to the relevant information. Access depends on the extent that the mass media are regulated or repressed by the political system. It depends on the extent that the media have been 'captured' or 'domesticated' by the ruling elite. Thus a political system which does not allow the mass media to function freely and independently would certainly impede the mass media's access to critical information which could be used by the citizens at strategic moments such as election.

The Nigerian media are inhibited in their functionality by several laws which are geared towards preventing media access to information which, when published, could direct attention to the activities of government. Such laws include the Official Secrets Act of 1962 and 1990 which makes it an offence to obtain, reproduce or retain any matter regarded as classified by government for which no authorization was given. The law defines *classified matter* to mean "any information or thing which under any system of security classification from time to time in use by or by any branch of Government, is not to be disclosed to the public and of which the disclosure to the public would be prejudicial to the security of Nigeria" (Elias, 1969:42). While the security and peace of the Republic may necessitate occasional restriction of certain information, the open-ended nature of what constitutes a secret and who defines it make the Official Secret Act an albatross on the neck of the mass media in Nigeria.

Between 1984 and 1994, the Federal Military Government promulgated eleven Decrees against the press, the most contentious being the Public Officers (Protection against False Accusation) Decree No. 4 of 1984 with the commencement date of March 29, 1984 as well as the Treason and Treasonable Offences Decree No. 29 of 1993 which prescribed death sentence for any journalists whose reports government could describe as inciting and, therefore, treasonable.

### **The Politician's Response**

Nigerian politicians are not passive in relating with the mass media. They respond to the monitoring by the media often in a variety of forms: violent threats, bribes to individual journalists and the media authorities, censorship or to ingratiate the media professionals. Sometimes, the response is subtle but not illegal. The certificate forgery scandal involving the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Salisu Buhari, in 1999, is a case in point. Attempts, ranging from hostility, subtle pressure and outright inducements, were made to stop the media from further investigating and publishing the scandal, albeit unsuccessfully, until the scandal consumed the then Speaker. About the same time, similar allegations were levelled against the then Senate President, Evans Enwerem, who was eventually impeached; the then Governor of Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the then Governor of Cross River State, Donald Duke. In all these cases, the pressure on the media to discontinue their investigation and further running of the allegations took a similar pattern.

Another way that the politician responds to the media's inquest for democratic transparency is recourse to secrecy - a state of making sure nothing or not much is known about something. Such information blackout serves only the interest of government. This much is noted by Stiglitz (2002:29-30) that "secrecy gives those in government exclusive control over certain areas of knowledge, and thereby increases their power". Secrecy denies individuals the knowledge of what happens in government and consequently robs individuals of the requisite information to participate meaningfully in the democratic process.

Stiglitz's (2002:30) observation is very apt: "Essentially, meaningful participation in democratic processes requires informed participants. Secrecy reduces the information available to the citizenry, hobbling people's ability to participate meaningfully". Part of participation in the democratic process is the expression of opinion which forms a major input in governance. Disclosure of information as well as the expression of opinion are very important and must be so stressed. Voters rely on and need all shades of information to reach judgment in deciding who governs them from time to time. The consequence of lack of relevant, adequate and timely information is pervasive, and permeates the entire society in more ways than one.

Secrecy leads to 'leaks' in government. Leaks contribute heavily to rumours, distrust and lack of faith in government. Citizens find this situation a compelling incentive to deviate, having found no reason to trust government. It gives room for underground or militant press where half-truths and empty rumours are elevated to truths, printed and circulated. When embarrassed, government operates shakily, unsure of itself; the decision-making process is weakened; scapegoats (perhaps, imaginary) for the leaks are fingered, hunted and liquidated politically. Government retreats into defensive positions, is sometimes evasive, and is compelled into rejoinders that are hardly believed by the populace.

Secrecy creates artificial scarcity of information, and gives rise to what Stiglitz (2002:35) calls "rents", a situation where "public officials disclose secrets to those

members of the press that treat them well" (Stiglitz, 2002:40). The consequence is predictable - the public does not have access to adequate and timely information, and government officials use their control of information in their favour to further their grip on the individuals.

### **The Way Forward**

The relevance of the mass media to the entronement and sustenance of democratic accountability demands a multi-directional approach. It demands as much action from the government as it does from the media owners and media professionals. Some of the approaches towards making the mass media more relevant in the accountability process are:

#### *(i) Freedom of Information Bill*

Government treatment of the Freedom of Information Bill affects transparency in governance. The aim of the bill is to strengthen democratic machinery by allowing the populace, particularly the media, access to government information which will in turn allow them to participate meaningfully in the democratic process. As it has been earlier stated, only a thoroughly informed citizenry can take informed decisions and judge the government objectively.

The general attitude of the government towards the FOI Bill has been ambivalent; the bill has suffered a stuttering life in the National Assembly. Although the Assembly passed the FOI Bill in 2007, the then President Olusegun Obasanjo expressed reservations about some provisions of the Bill and therefore refused to assent to it. The Parliament, however, failed to override the president's veto. Subsequent attempts by the National Assembly to reconsider the Bill have at best been attempts to make it cumbersome and unworkable through demands for security clearance.

#### *(ii) Deregulation of the Media*

Transparency thrives more in a society where the media ownership, by extension media power, is decentralized. Where the major media outlets are owned and controlled by a few individuals, diversity of voices and opinions would be narrowed. The prevailing pattern of ownership of broadcast stations offers interesting insight. In spite of the licensing of private broadcasters in Nigeria by the National Broadcasting Commission since 1992, broadcasting is still dominated by the State and Federal Government-owned outlets. This, therefore, calls for further decentralization of media ownership which would, to a great extent, lead to a decentralization of media power. The proliferation of media voices increases opportunities for the media to put pressure on political leaders for transparency.

#### *(iii) Reducing Self-censorship*

Self-censorship weakens the journalist's ability to discharge his responsibility of demanding openness from politicians. Self-censorship vitiates the commitment of the journalists to demand openness by political office holders. The apprehension by media organizations over possible reprisals by government particularly attacks on the



organization and its staff as well as withdrawal of advertising patronage, drives self-censorship deep into the media institution.

A panacea for excessive self-censorship is self-belief by the journalist. He must also note that the politician would not grant him the latitude to publish, but that by constantly knocking on the doors of freedom, he (the journalist) can extend the frontiers of freedom which can in turn lead to more commitment to transparency by political office holders.

### **Conclusion**

Information is an important resource in any setting. It is particularly so in enhancing transparency in the democratic process. While information is the hallmark of transparency, secrecy is a pillar in totalitarian states. Secrecy undermines democratic values and processes, strengthens and entrenches the dictatorships, discourages public participation in the democratic process, and insulates government and its officials against accusation of mistakes, particularly in the face of policy failures. The solution lies not only in the de-concentration of the ownership of the media, and the willingness by government officials to be transparent, it also lies in reduction of self-censorship by journalists and the provision of a legal framework such as the Freedom of Information Bill to move transparency from the level of willingness to the level of legal duty on the party of government officials.

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